The Literature of Meyerling's Mystery

By LOUIS A. SPRINGER.

A HEAVY black cross, over it the heading "The Death of Crown Prince Rudolph," and beneath it a few lines of meager details appeared on the black bordered front pages of the Vienna newspapers on the morning of January 31, 1889. This was the first literature of the Meyerling tragedy, the precursor of a flood of memories, historical romances and magazine and newspaper articles which offered an explanation or a solution of the most intriguing royal mystery of modern Europe.

Rudolph's death, according to the Government papers, was due to heart failure. The unofficial press guardedly suggested a hunting accident. Before the papers were on the streets the people were whispering "murder" and "double suicide," for despite all the efforts of the Austrian authorities to conceal the fact it had become known that a woman, the beautiful Baroness Marie Vatsera, had died with the Crown Prince. A mystery involving the imperial Hapsburg house was born that instant, a mystery that fascinated the light hearted, gossiping and sympathetic Viennese. Had the truth been told the tragedy of Meyerling might have been a ninety day wonder and then relegated to a place in history among the other sorrows of this unhappy dynastic house. But it was not the way of the Hapsburgs to tell their secrets, and they remained gravely silent.

The name of Rudolph was never again spoken in Francis Joseph's presence nor at the court of Vienna; the hunting lodge at Meyerling, where the tragedy occurred, was razed to the ground and the surrounding landscape was entirely altered. The Emperor willed there was no tragedy, even no Meyerling. The curse of it, however, remained; not a person whom the tragedy touched but suffered from it. Countess Marie Larisch, a niece of Empress Elizabeth and a friend of both Rudolph and the Baroness, wrote as a woman whose life was saddened by it when she said in "My Past": "One of my sons shot himself on account of what he read in one of the lying books, and my daughters' lives were embittered by hearing so much that is untrue regarding the part that I played in the drama."

II.

Less than a week after the tragedy Baroness Vatsera's mother wrote the story of her daughter's death, and supplemented it with correspondence of the Crown Prince and the Baroness. The books were seized by the Austrian Government and destroyed. Herr Berthold Frischauer, a friend of Rudolph's, made a stenographic copy or one that fell into his possession. Last summer, when there was no longer fear of the Hapsburg wrath, he published the unhappy mother's story, which was to the effect that the Baroness and Rudolph had taken their own lives at the hunting lodge in accordance with a plan arranged at their previous meeting. She fortified this statement with the last letter she received from her daughter and the letters announcing that he intended to commit suicide written by the Crown Prince to his wife, Crown Princess Stephanie, and to his under secretary, Szogeny. This little book, suppressed for thirty-two years, was the only statement of the tragedy ever made by the Vatseras or by Marie's uncles, the Baltazzis.

Of the Meyerling mystery there have been at least ten different solutions offered. One which was early circulated and gained much credence was that Rudolph was killed by the young Baroness's uncle, who avenged his niece's dishonor. This was dismissed by the statement of friends of the two uncles, who declared "the Baltazzis never once thought of murder, and the last thing they desired or would have desired was a scandal." It was asserted that Rudolph was Marie's brother and that, driven mad by the discovery, he murdered her and then committed suicide. Two French writers made this the basis of their story of the tragedy, and three other writers made it the principal theme of mystery novels. "There certainly was some gossip about Marie's parentage," wrote Countess Larisch, "but it never concerned the Emperor or any prince of the imperial family."

Another version of the tragedy, for which a French writer claimed the best of authority, was to the effect that the Baroness Marie's lover, young Battagi, who was one of the party at the lodge, sought a quarrel with Rudolph and shot him with his own revolver. The Countess, rather than face the scandal that would follow, turned the same weapon upon herself. Doubt was cast upon this story by the fact that the post mortem reports all disclose that the young Baroness had died several hours before the Crown Prince.

III.

A writer in the *Temple Bar*, London, three months after the tragedy, says: "The tragic death of Crown Prince Rudolph will exercise both the historian and the romance writer of the future; the historian to tell in what way he met his death, the poet and novelist to seize upon the romantic incidents of the Prince's life, his unhappy marriage, his yearnings for liberty, his sad amours and his mysterious suicide." The affair was handled with much delicacy. The Crown Prince was represented as a man of high character suffering from the effects of an unfortunate marriage and the pangs of a hopeless love. He places a spotless sheet on the dead body of his sweetheart, who had committed suicide, and he scatters over it a profusion of flowers before he takes his own life.

The Countess Larisch.

The Crown Prince Rudolph.

*Baroness Marie Vatsera.

With this we might compare the most recent estimates of the characters in the tragedy and the latest versions of the tragedy. The Countess Larisch, who was Rudolph's cousin, warned Baroness Vatsera as soon as she heard of the girl's infatuation for him in these words: "Wolves like Rudolph eat up little lambs like you. I assure you he is not the hero you imagine him, but a heartless and fast man." Again, she quotes Archduke John of Tuscany's remarks to her, "You could not save a coward like Rudolph. With his nervous constitution undermined by drugs and brandy fear alone might have made him commit suicide. He seems to have turned into a contemptible coward." Another recent writer says that the life Rudolph led brought on paresis and that when the court doctor told the old Emperor this he replied, "God's ways are inscrutable. Perhaps he sent me this trial to spare me a yet harder one."

In "The Last Days of Archduke Rudolph," which was purported to have been written by one near to the Crown Prince and was edited by Hamil Grant, frequent mention is made of the Crown Prince's connection with a State plot. Countess Larisch goes further in this matter and says that at her last meeting with Rudolph he gave her a small iron box. "There is one person who knows the secret of this casket, and he alone has the right (failing me) to ask for its return. Never mind the name. You can deliver it to the person who can tell you four letters. Write them now, and repeat them after me. Listen," and the Crown Prince slowly uttered the letters. "R. I. O. U." These letters, according to general belief, represented a secret of his house—the destiny of the world rests with the Hapsburgs

A few days after Rudolph's death Countess Larisch received a letter signed with these letters asking her to meet the writer. The mysterious correspondent was Archduke John of Tuscany. Don't regret Rudolph he told her. "The Crown Prince had killed himself, but if the Emperor had known all it would have been his duty to have had him tried by military law, and that as a traitor." "Oh, my God!" I cried, "what did he do? Was he thinking of the Crown of Hungary?" The Archduke nodded assentingly.

IV.

The latest version of the tragedy is that furnished by Baron von Margutti in his "Reminiscences of the Austrian Court," recently published. Rudolph fell a victim to one of his love affairs, "but not his love affair with Marie Vatsera." "The Crown Prince had established relations with the young and attractive wife of the gamekeeper," says Baron von Margutti. "On the fatal night the gamekeeper found the Crown Prince in his house and at once settled accounts with him. Rudolph came to a miserable end. His corpse was thrown into the snow in front of the lodge and remained there till it was found next morning."

Countess Larisch tells of the finding of the young Baroness's body, as related to her by the court physician, Dr. Wiederhofer. It had been carried from the room in which she died to a small room lit by a skylight. "There I saw the body of a woman—nude except for a fine lawn and lace chemise," said Dr. Wiederhofer. "Then I began my examination. I parted the long hair away from the face, which was almost completely hidden, and then . . . Oh, Countess! . . . Then I recognized Marie Vatsera—the girl I had known ever since she was a child. Poor child! for she was little more than a child."

When the young Baroness Vatsera did not return home her mother, insisting that the Crown Prince had abducted her daughter, went to the imperial palace to implore the Empress Elizabeth's help in finding her. Elizabeth finally said she would receive her. Says Countess Larisch: "The two mothers looked at each other in silence; then Madame Vatsera fell on her knees with a despairing cry 'Marie—my daughter!' Elizabeth shrank back from the poor woman's outstretched arms. She examined her with pitiless curiosity and then said coldly and cruelly 'It is too late. They are both dead.' Madame Vatsera fainted. The Empress looked at her unmoved and walked away without a word."

Adolphe Aderer in his story "Meyerling," published in *Minerva*, Paris, in November, 1902, says that when the Empress turned from her Madame Vatsera exclaimed: "It is you who killed by daughter. God will avenge me!" He adds that when Elizabeth sank to the ground stabbed by the assassin Lucchani at Geneva these words and Meyerling must have flashed to her mind. Of the other people connected with this tragedy: Count Bombelles, who played the role of Mephistopheles, was ever afterward hated by the Emperor and was forced to retire from the Court. Count Hoyos, companion of Rudolph at the time of his death, disappeared from Vienna.

Archduke John of Tuscany was drowned at sea. The gamekeeper at Meyerling disappeared the night of the tragedy and a year or so afterward, according to report, he was murdered. Bataggi, the lover, was killed in a duel, John Tranquillan, or as he was called Bratfisch, the Crown Prince's driver and notorious as his agent in many of his amours, was ordered out of Austria and is said to have died in an insane asylum on Ward's Island, New York.

Baroness Marie Vatsera's body, hurriedly dressed in the finery she had worn to the hunting lodge and propped up in a carriage between her uncle and Count Stockau, was driven to the graveyard of the Cistercian Abbey of Heligenkreuz and hastily

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